The Unexpected Gift

By Ruby Lewis

Between the ages four and ten, I knew exactly which activities brought me bliss. At the top of the list was placing a sprinkler in the center of my lawn and sprinting through the cascade of cold water. My little brother and I would shriek with glee until our bulldog began gnawing on the sprinkler and we were forced to put it away. Rereading the Harry Potter books was also joyous, but not quite as much as walking to the mall near my house for a jarringly sweet cup of frozen yogurt (topped with sour gummy worms and mint chocolates—a stellar combination). And, of course, I loved riding a borrowed Razor scooter full-tilt down the treacherous slope of my cul-de-sac.

Attempting to define a sensation like bliss restricts and diminishes it. Bliss was easy when I was young because it was thoughtless. It was a gut feeling: relished, but unexamined. As I aged, bliss became increasingly elusive. I could no longer discern which actions brought me bliss. The pillow forts and Nerf gun battles of my childhood had lost their allure, but my new obligations—homework and extracurriculars—were an unappealing alternative. In the process of growing up, like many other former children, I lost sight of bliss.

In eighth grade, baffled and lacking self-awareness (like most middle schoolers), I turned to the people around me for the definition of bliss. My friends fantasized about high school. My little brother was itching for the latest Pokémon card or Dungeons and Dragons manual. Adults in my life spoke wistfully of their next vacation. The answer was clear to me: bliss was tucked away in the events of the future. It was close enough to be tantalizing, but too far away to
experience. It lay in the nearest holiday, in upcoming plans with friends, in the next phase of
growing up.

To any outside observer, there was a clear flaw in my definition of bliss: it did not allow
bliss to arrive in the present. It is impossible to experience a bliss that lives in the months or
years ahead, much less to be dissolved in it. When bliss is confined to the future, it becomes
unattainable, a figment of the imagination. Dissatisfaction seeps into the present. In the first year
of high school, I became unhappy and disgruntled. I blamed school, homework, the weather, my
cat—any external entity I could hold responsible for the absence of bliss in my life. As one might
expect, my complaining was fruitless. It was not until one camping trip in the fall of 2019 that I
found bliss.

Wispy clouds scudded across a cerulean sky. Mounds of sand shifted under my well-
worn hiking boots. My thick, fuzzy coat flapped open, allowing for the caress of a lively breeze.
The shallow saltwater extended long and flat across the great bay at the mouth of the estuary
along the Oregon coast. Beneath the gentle ripples carved into the water’s glimmering surface,
Dungeness crabs scuttled, salmon and harbor seals darted, and a host of cockles burbled
cheerfully. Two boys splashed through beams of weak sunlight into the bright, brisk water
offshore. Strips of moist seaweed dappled the grey-gold sand.

My steps were long and easy as I traversed the shoreline, my pace unhurried. It was
midmorning on our first full day at Whalen Island. We had arrived and set up our campsite the
night before. Rain had lashed furiously at our bodies, and the wind had blown sideways against
our tents. This morning, however, had dawned fresh and dewy. I gave a comforting tug on the
strap of the lightweight backpack slung across my shoulder and found it snug and secure. I
paused to breathe in deeply and revel in how easily the breath came.
In that moment, I felt I had lived for years asleep without knowing that I was sleeping. Suddenly, during my brief stroll along the seashore, I awoke with a sharp intake of breath, a soft exhale, and the feeling that the world had come alive around me. Bliss was the instant of awakening.

To be dissolved in bliss is to be completely present in a moment. This undeniable truth is what I had known as a small child savoring every carefree game, but forgotten as a young adult. With bliss comes awareness of the body—wind on the skin, earth underfoot, the sweet ache of muscle in motion. With these palpable sensations comes awareness of the soul—gratitude and calm washing through the spirit like gentle waves. Once it had passed, I retraced my experience of bliss on the Oregon coast with quiet joy and longing. It lingered with me during mass, and even after. I poured my scattered fragments of memory into my journal and the margins of my schoolwork, desperate to remember. In the moment, however, I simply appreciated the simplicity of nature for the unexpected gift that it was.

My current bliss lies in nature, just as my childhood bliss lay on the streets of my neighborhood. It lingers not just along the shoreline where I first discovered it, but in the musty, sleepy depths of the old growth forest, brimming with a joyous cohort of oak, red alder, and vine maple; and in the scrubby, rolling high desert, where cold seeps through the ground under a glittering sky, and the heady scent of sagebrush thickens the air. My bliss rushes through the Sandy River and traces the ridges of Cottonwood Canyon. No longer do I frantically seek out an idyllic future, ignoring the present. I live purposefully, knowing that bliss will arrive.